My Quiet Beach Vacation
Is Actually a Government Population Initiative,
as I Suspected

Story Starts
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Chapter 1.1 -
Naturally, Government Initiatives
Have My Best Interests at Heart

The nearly-naked staff—and calling them nearly naked was generous, given that the important bits were covered by optimism alone—moved through the crowd with practised efficiency. They separated the screamers from the throwers, confiscated anything that could be used as a projectile or covering, and guided everyone toward a single row of chairs facing the stage with the gentle insistence of border collies herding particularly furious sheep.

One row. Not scattered seating, not round tables, not even the mercy of a second row where someone could hide behind someone else. One long, horizontal line of chairs, shoulder to shoulder, like a police lineup designed by someone with a vendetta against personal space. Behind the row, staff members took up positions at even intervals—close enough to intervene, far enough to pretend they weren't watching. The arrangement had the architectural philosophy of a firing squad, except the condemned were naked and the executioners wore transparent aprons.

Saki had not gone quietly.

"That's mine. I pulled it off the table. Possession is nine-tenths of—give it back—"

Hayasaka, dead-eyed and offering an apologetic bow that apologised for nothing, peeled the tablecloth from Saki's white-knuckled grip with the mechanical precision of someone who'd been trained for exactly this scenario.

Saki's face cycled through five stages of grief in two seconds before settling on a sixth: homicidal intent.

"Programme policy requires all participants to remain in equal states during orientation," a staff member behind us recited, folding the tablecloth with origami precision. "We apologise for the inconvenience."

'Inconvenience.'

The word bounced around my skull like a pinball. Inconvenience was a delayed train. Inconvenience was a sold-out vending machine. Being stripped, drugged, and seated naked in a row alongside every woman you'd ever failed to make eye contact with in high school was not an inconvenience. It was a Geneva Convention violation with chandeliers.

Even through the haze of shock, I noticed it. All of us shared the same flushed skin, the same dilated pupils, the same sheen of perspiration that had nothing to do with the room temperature. The warmth in the gut. The prickling across the skin. The way blood moved with purpose toward places blood had no business congregating during a formal government briefing.

They'd spiked all our drinks.

Every single one of us had downed that "hydration supplement" like trusting idiots, and now whatever compound was in it was rewriting our circulatory systems in real time. I could feel it—a low, insistent heat that pulsed behind my navel and radiated outward with the steady determination of a siege engine. My body was staging a coup, and my brain had been locked out of the command centre.

My hands were in my lap. This was not a choice driven by modesty—though modesty was certainly screaming from somewhere in the back of my consciousness—but by the cold mathematical reality that I was experiencing a pharmaceutical erection in a room full of women I knew personally, and my hands were the only barrier between me and a social death so complete that archaeologists would study it.

The problem was geometry. My hands were average-sized. What they were attempting to conceal was not cooperating with the concealment effort. I adjusted. Readjusted. Crossed my legs—which only redirected the problem sideways with alarming visibility. Uncrossed them, which made it different but not better. Attempted the childhood tuck—that desperate manoeuvre every boy discovers at age nine where you angle it downward and press your thighs together, the one that works fine when you're nine and the stakes are a swimming pool, less so when you're twenty-one and the stakes are your continued existence as a social being.

Nothing worked. Biology had seized the wheel and was driving straight off a cliff with enthusiastic disregard for my dignity.

I was seated dead centre. Because of course I was. The staff had guided me to the middle chair with the deliberate choreography of people following a seating chart, which meant someone had planned this. Someone had looked at a diagram of this room and thought, *'Yes, the lone male should sit at the exact midpoint of the row where he'll be equidistant from the maximum number of naked women. For symmetry.'*

The logic was either bureaucratic or sadistic. Knowing this programme, probably both.

Hiratsuka Shizuka sat to my left. Her arms were crossed over her chest with the structural reinforcement of someone who'd sooner die than let them drop, her jaw set in a line that could cut glass, and her eyes were fixed on a point approximately three hundred metres behind the stage wall. She radiated the energy of a woman who had been promised a beach holiday and received a hostage situation. Behind her, a staff member in transparent frills stood at parade rest, smiling serenely at the back of Hiratsuka-sensei's head as though completely unaware that the woman in front of her was mentally composing a list of people to kill, sorted by priority.

Isshiki Iroha sat to my right. She'd arranged her hair over her shoulders with architectural precision, creating a curtain that covered more than it had any

structural right to. Her legs were crossed, her posture was rigid, and she was gripping the edges of her chair hard enough to leave fingerprints in the wood.

'Don't look left. Don't look right. Forward. Just forward.'

I made the mistake of glancing left.

"Don't." Hiratsuka-sensei's voice came from somewhere deep in her chest. A vibration more than a word. The vocal equivalent of a landmine clicking underfoot—not the explosion, just the promise of one.

I snapped forward.

I made the mistake of glancing right.

"Senpai." Iroha didn't even turn her head. The sound that escaped her throat was subhuman. Canine. A frequency designed by evolution to communicate a single message: *move and die.*

I snapped forward.

Forward was not safe either. The staff flanking the stage wore what I could only describe as the suggestion of clothing—transparent aprons that offered as much coverage as clingfilm, held in place by strings that seemed to exist on a dare. They stood at parade rest with professional smiles, as if their uniform situation was completely normal and we were the ones being unreasonable about it.

More staff stood behind our row. I could feel their presence—the soft shift of weight on heels, the whisper of fabric that contained no actual fabric—stationed at intervals like sentries guarding prisoners. Every few seconds, one would lean forward to adjust a chair position or offer a glass of water with the serene attentiveness of flight attendants on the world's worst airline.

My peripheral vision—that treacherous, uncontrollable field of sensory input that no amount of willpower could fully deactivate—delivered continuous updates I had not requested and could not unsubscribe from. To Iroha's right:

skin. Beyond that: more skin. The entire row was a horizon line of bare shoulders and crossed arms and hands pressed into laps and flushed faces staring rigidly ahead, stretching in both directions like a Renaissance painting of collective suffering. Everyone had received the same unspoken memo: *Do not look sideways. Do not acknowledge the situation. Stare forward and pretend you are somewhere—anywhere—else.*

The universal coping strategy of the forcibly naked: aggressive forward-facing denial.

Further down the row, Miura's voice carried with the indiscretion of someone too furious to whisper properly.

"Hina. Hina. Wipe your mouth. You're still—there's still—use the back of your hand, I don't care, just—Hina, I swear to God."

"I can't help it," Ebina whispered back, leaning past whoever sat between them, her voice thick with something that was definitely not tears. "The angle from this seat is—"

"I don't want to know what the angle is, Hina."

"I will end you."

I stared at the stage. I stared at the enormous letters spelling B.R.E.E.D. I stared at them until my eyes burned and the letters dissolved into meaningless shapes and then reassembled into meaningless shapes that spelled out a government acronym designed by someone who either had no self-awareness or too much of it. Birthrate Recovery through Engagement, Encouragement, and Domestic Partnership. Every word chosen to sound humane. Every word failing spectacularly.

Then I did a double take.

Among the staff standing in attendance near the stage's left wing—positioned in the same apron-and-nothing-else uniform as the others but wearing it with the casual indifference of someone who'd been professionally photographed

in more—was a face I recognised. Not from school. From magazine covers. From the kind of late-night television advertisements that played during the commercial breaks of shows I watched for the "plot."

Kawashima Ami. Model. Actress-in-training. The kind of face that sold photobooks and energy drinks and the vague concept of feminine beauty to demographics that included, statistically and regrettably, me.

Why was she here? Why was she calm? The rest of us were falling apart—covering, cursing, bleeding from the nose in Ebina's case—and this woman stood among the staff like she was waiting for a photoshoot to start. The staff themselves hadn't flinched either. None of them were covering up, none of them were panicking, none of them had the wild-eyed look of people who'd been stripped and drugged against their will. They moved through the chaos with the rehearsed composure of people who'd known exactly what tonight would look like.

'Something about this is wrong. Well—more wrong. Additionally wrong. Wrong in a different direction than the existing wrongness.'

She caught me looking. One eyebrow rose—a precise, calibrated motion that communicated amusement, assessment, and mild contempt in a single muscular contraction. Her lips twitched. Not a smile. A measurement. I was being appraised by a professional, and the preliminary results were clearly unflattering.

Further down the row, Iroha coughed. The cough was pointed. Surgical. It carried the payload of an entire unspoken paragraph about where my eyes had been and how long they'd been there, and the growl that followed it vibrated through the chair and into my skeleton like a tuning fork struck against bone.

My head snapped forward so fast my neck popped.

'Eyes front, Hachiman. Eyes permanently, irrevocably, constitutionally front.'

Music began. Soft orchestral strings, the kind that played during corporate orientation videos and pharmaceutical advertisements—appropriate, given that we'd all been involuntarily medicated not twenty minutes ago. The lights dimmed slightly, and a spotlight illuminated the two women on stage with the theatrical gravitas of a product launch. Which, in a sense, this was. We were the product.

"Welcome once more!" Shichijou Aria beamed, her arms spread wide in a gesture of hospitality that belonged at a resort opening, not a mass abduction. "For those who arrived during the, ah, transitional period—I'm Shichijou Aria, your programme host!"

"Amakusa Shino. Programme coordinator." The dark-haired woman beside her tapped her clipboard against her palm with metronomic patience. "Before we continue, I want to assure everyone that what you're experiencing is perfectly normal, perfectly legal, and will be perfectly explained in the next twenty minutes."

"Perfectly illegal is what it is," Shizuka muttered beside me. Her whisper carried the structural integrity of a load-bearing wall.

Shino didn't blink. She'd heard. She chose to continue, which told me everything I needed to know about the power dynamic in this room. When a woman built like Hiratsuka-sensei—a woman who'd once punched a vending machine hard enough to dent it over a stuck coffee can—makes a threat, and you don't flinch, you're either very brave or backed by something much bigger than yourself—that or what's most likely is that they do not know.

"Japan is dying."

Two words. Delivered flat, unadorned, the way a coroner might state cause of death. The orchestral music cut out. The spotlight narrowed. On the enormous screen behind the stage, a graph appeared—birth rates plotted against time, the line descending with the steady inevitability of a plane that had run out of fuel somewhere over the Pacific.

"Not metaphorically. Not philosophically. Demographically." Shino advanced her slides with a click that echoed through the silent hall. Population pyramids appeared, each successive decade more top-heavy than the last, until the final projection for 2060 looked less like a pyramid and more like a mushroom—a bloated cap of elderly citizens balanced on a thinning stem of working-age adults. "By 2050, forty per cent of Japan's population will be over sixty-five. By 2060, we will have lost a third of our current population entirely. The tax base collapses. The pension system becomes unsustainable. Healthcare infrastructure fails under the weight of demand it was never designed to carry."

Ah. There it was.

The GDP argument. The sacred text of every policy think tank, every white paper, every hand-wringing editorial in the Nikkei. I'd heard this sermon before—different pulpits, same scripture. The economy needed bodies. Not people, mind you. Bodies. Units of productive capacity. Tax-generating organisms that could be slotted into cubicles and factory floors and service counters to keep the great machine churning. The same argument that had been levelled at my househusband essay, the same logic that reduced human existence to a line item on a national balance sheet—except now, apparently, the government had decided that if people wouldn't produce those bodies voluntarily, it would arrange the production personally.

I'd written an essay about this once. About how society valued men only as economic units. I'd meant it as a cynical observation, not a prophecy. And yet here I sat—naked, erect, and being presented with a slideshow about why my reproductive capacity was a matter of national security—and the universe's commitment to proving me right at my own expense remained, as always, impeccable.

That was the part they never said aloud, wasn't it? When politicians talked about the birth rate crisis, they didn't mourn the absence of children. They mourned the absence of future workers. Future consumers. Future contributors to a GDP figure that existed primarily so that men in suits could

point at it during international summits and feel something approximating relevance.

The entire framing revealed itself if you tilted your head even slightly: *Japan's workforce is shrinking* didn't mean *families are struggling* or *people are lonely* or *the social contract has failed an entire generation that did everything it was told and got nothing it was promised.* It meant *the machine needs fuel and we're running out.*

Every economic indicator they wheeled out was just a different way of saying the same thing: *Please produce more humans so the numbers don't go down.* Not for the humans' sake. For the numbers' sake. The humans were incidental. The humans had always been incidental.

GDP. Gross Domestic Product. Gross was right. The entire metric was a measure of economic activity that counted arms manufacturing and oil spills and the legal fees from corporate fraud as positive contributions, while a mother raising her children at home registered as literally zero. A househusband—say, hypothetically, me—would be an economic non-entity. A statistical ghost. Invisible to the very framework these people worshipped, because the framework had never been designed to see people. Only output.

And now they wanted me to breed for it.

The irony was so dense it had its own gravitational field. I'd written an essay about this. I'd sat in Hiratsuka-sensei's classroom and argued that society reduced men to economic units, that the entire system was a machine that consumed human hours and excreted quarterly earnings reports, and my reward for being right was sitting naked in a government facility dressed as a getaway island resort while a slideshow explained, in precise demographic detail, exactly how right I'd been.

Being vindicated had never felt less like victory.

"—which is why the Cabinet Office, in coordination with the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, authorised the Birthrate Recovery through Engagement, Encouragement, and Domestic Partnership initiative." Aria took over with the

smooth handoff of a relay team that had practised this transition. "BREED is a first-of-its-kind pilot programme designed not merely to incentivise reproduction, but to create sustainable family units supported by comprehensive government infrastructure."

She pressed something on her tablet. The screen shifted to show a logo—the B.R.E.E.D. acronym rendered in soft pastels with a motif of interlocking rings beneath it. Someone had been paid actual taxpayer money to design that. Someone had sat in a meeting room and presented colour swatches and font options for a government breeding programme logo, and everyone in that meeting had nodded and said *yes, the sage green really communicates trustworthiness.* Someone else had probably argued for teal. There had probably been a second meeting about the font. Taxpayer money. My parents' taxes. Funding a graphic designer's careful deliberation over whether the interlocking rings should overlap by fifteen or twenty per cent.

"You are the first batch." Shino's eyes swept the row. Methodical. Cataloguing. The way a quality control inspector examines products on a conveyor belt. "Every person on this island is a participant. The holiday winners—" she gestured toward us in the seats "—the volunteer staff—" she indicated the apron-clad attendants flanking the hall "—the coordinators—" she touched her own collarbone "—and one special guest who will be introduced shortly. All participants. All selected through a rigorous screening process that evaluated compatibility, health metrics, psychological profiles, and—"

A fractional pause. The kind of pause that exists because the speaker knows exactly what the next words will do to the room and has chosen to say them anyway.

"—reproductive viability."

The room's temperature dropped three degrees. Or perhaps that was just the collective blood draining from eleven faces simultaneously. Reproductive viability. Two words that transformed every person in this room from a human being with a name and a history and preferences about coffee into a biological

asset on a government spreadsheet. Column A: name. Column B: age. Column C: whether your organs worked well enough to justify the investment.

I'd been reduced to a line item. We all had. The only difference between this and the GDP argument was scale—at least the economists had the decency to dehumanise us from a distance.

"Now." Aria stepped forward, her expression settling into something warm and practised. Maternal. Which was an obscene word choice given the context, but accurate nonetheless. "Before anyone panics further—"

"Further?" someone down the row hissed—sounded like Kawasomething. The word carried the exhausted incredulity of someone who'd already passed through panic and come out the other side into whatever lay beyond it.

"—we want to explain what BREED offers its participants. Because this isn't a burden. This is an opportunity."

She said *opportunity* the way a real estate agent says *cosy* when they mean the bedroom can't fit a double bed. The way pyramid schemers open with the benefits and trap you in a ramble so long and so relentless that you sign up just to make it stop. The way your parents say *we need to talk* when what they mean is *we've already decided and this conversation is a courtesy.*

"The programme provides comprehensive support for every participant's personal ambitions and life goals." Aria's tablet glowed with the soft light of a device that had been preloaded with someone else's future. "The government recognises that asking young people to start families means nothing if those young people can't simultaneously pursue the careers and dreams that give their lives meaning. So BREED doesn't just support families. It supports *you.*"

'You.' Personalised. Intimate. The singular pronoun deployed like a sniper round, aimed at the part of the brain that wanted to believe someone in power actually cared about your individual existence. Marketing. This was marketing. The same psychological architecture that sold insurance and gym memberships and mobile phone contracts with the first three months

free—make the target feel seen, make the offer feel tailored, and bury the cost in the terms and conditions. Page forty-seven. Always page forty-seven.

The screen changed to show a profile. A photograph I recognised instantly—sharp features, perfect hair, a smile that had been calibrated in a laboratory to communicate warmth while revealing nothing. Even in a headshot, Yukinoshita Haruno managed to look like she was three moves ahead of the photographer.

Yukinoshita Haruno.

"Take Yukinoshita Haruno-san." Aria gestured with an open palm, the motion smooth and rehearsed. "Haruno-san's ambition is to enter politics. Through BREED, she gains access to government mentorship networks, introductions to sitting Diet members, policy advisory internships, and fast-tracked candidacy support. The connections she'd spend a decade building through conventional channels and her family? That and more within her first year of participation."

I glanced down the row toward Haruno. She sat with her legs crossed and her chin lifted, watching her own profile displayed on a screen the size of a small cinema with an expression I couldn't quite parse. Not surprise—nothing surprised Haruno, or if it did, she'd never give the room the satisfaction of showing it. Not anger, either. Something closer to... calculation. The rapid, invisible arithmetic of someone weighing costs against benefits in real time, running the numbers on whether this cage's gilding was thick enough to make the bars worth tolerating.

She caught me looking. Unlike Ami's single eyebrow, Haruno offered a smile. A real one—or at least a convincing enough facsimile that the difference ceased to matter. It said: *Isn't this interesting?*

It was not interesting. It was terrifying. Because if Haruno was doing the maths rather than looking for the exit, it meant the offer was good enough to make someone that smart consider staying.

Then Haruno's eyes travelled downward—slowly, deliberately, with the unhurried trajectory of someone browsing a menu—and settled into a smile so sultry it should have required a broadcasting licence. Something close shut inside my chest. A trapdoor. A bulkhead slamming down between the rational part of my brain and whatever part was currently receiving that smile.

'Welcome,' said the spider to the fly.

Both Iroha and Hiratsuka-sensei growled, and my head snapped forward with the trained obedience of a dog that had been shocked by the same fence twice.

"Hiratsuka Shizuka-san dreams of opening a private literary academy and publishing her novel." Aria's voice softened with what might have been genuine sympathy, or might have been the rehearsed gentleness of someone delivering bad news in a good wrapper. "BREED offers startup grants for educational enterprises, publishing industry connections through government-affiliated cultural programmes, and—" a delicate pause, the kind calibrated to communicate sensitivity while detonating something deeply personal "—the programme itself fulfils certain personal milestones that Hiratsuka-san has expressed interest in."

The chair to my left creaked. Shizuka's fingers had dug into the armrests like grappling hooks.

Certain personal milestones. They meant marriage. They were publicly announcing, on a stage, in front of everyone she'd been forced to sit naked beside, that Hiratsuka-sensei wanted to get married. The woman who had once threatened a student with physical violence for bringing it up—the woman whose unmarried status was the one subject even Yukinoshita Haruno approached with tactical caution—was having her most private vulnerability projected onto a cinema-sized screen as a bullet point on a government slideshow.

I didn't look at her. Looking at her right now would have been an act of cruelty I wasn't willing to commit. But I could hear the armrest groaning under her grip, and that told me everything.

"Miura Yumiko-san—fashion brand and boutique ownership. BREED provides business startup grants, retail space priority in government-developed commercial districts, and connections to the fashion industry through cultural export initiatives."

"Ebina Hina-san—BL manga artistry." Aria read this with a completely straight face. Not a flicker. Not a twitch. The professional composure of a woman announcing, to a room of naked abductees, that the Japanese government intended to fund boys' love manga as a matter of national reproductive policy. "Creative arts funding, studio space, publishing support, and entry into government-sponsored manga exhibitions."

Somewhere down the row, Ebina made a sound. It was small at first—a sharp intake of breath, the kind that precedes either a scream or a revelation—and then it grew into something low and fervent and deeply unsettling, like a prayer being answered in real time by a god she hadn't expected to be listening. Her hands clasped together. I didn't need to see her face to know her eyes were shining with the dangerous light of a woman who'd just been told her niche passion was a matter of national security.

"Hina," Miura hissed from down the row. "Whatever face you're making right now, stop making it."

Ebina did not stop making it.

"Isshiki Iroha-san—event planning and public relations." The photo that appeared was aggressively cute. Iroha had clearly submitted it herself—or it had been pulled from a social media account she curated with the same strategic precision she applied to everything. "Business incubator access, client referrals through government event contracts, and brand development support."

The chair to my right didn't move. Iroha had gone completely still. The dangerous kind of still. The kind that preceded either careful recalculation or extreme violence, and with Iroha, the distinction between the two was often academic.

"Kawasaki Saki-san." Aria paused here, and something in her expression changed—gentled. Not performed gentleness. Something that looked, despite everything, almost real. "Saki-san's ambition is to be a stay-at-home mother."

The hall went quiet in a different way. Even the ambient hostility muted, as if the room itself had decided to hold its breath.

"BREED offers full government-subsidised housing, childcare infrastructure, healthcare coverage, and pension credits that count participation years as equivalent to formal employment. Saki-san's dream isn't just supported. It's valued."

"Yuigahama Yui-san." Aria's voice carried the same gentled tone—the programme had clearly identified this particular ambition as one requiring careful handling. "Yui-san shares a similar vision. Her goal is to build a warm, supportive home as a full-time mother."

On the screen, Yuigahama's profile photo beamed with the unguarded brightness of someone who'd submitted a selfie because nobody told her not to.

"BREED extends the same comprehensive domestic support package—housing, childcare, healthcare, pension equivalency."

Further down the row, I heard two sharp intakes of breath in quick succession. Saki's would have been the quieter one—a controlled inhale through the nose, the sound of someone being offered something they'd trained themselves not to want because wanting it made the not-having worse. Yuigahama's would have been the louder one, accompanied by a small, involuntary sound at the back of her throat that she'd pretend was a cough if anyone asked.

The programme had just told two women that the thing society dismissed as a lack of ambition was, in the government's eyes, a career worth investing in. I understood the manipulation. I could see the strings. And I still couldn't deny that the thing on the other end of those strings was real—that someone, somewhere in a ministry building, had written the words *valued* and *not in isolation* into an official policy document, and that those words meant something to the people hearing them whether the intent behind them was sincere or not.

The profiles continued. Each one a precisely tailored pitch.

"Yukinoshita Yukino-san—law and public policy reform. Scholarship funding, internship placements with judicial reform committees, and—" Aria's eyes flickered toward her notes "—institutional support for systemic change initiatives outside existing family power structures."

'Outside existing family power structures.'

That was pointed. That was a knife wrapped in bureaucratic gauze, aimed directly at the Yukinoshita family's political apparatus. They were offering Yukino a way to pursue her goals without Haruno's shadow, without her mother's network, without the invisible architecture of obligation that had defined her entire life. A path that was hers—genuinely, structurally hers—built on government support rather than family debt.

That was... not nothing.

I hated that it wasn't nothing. I hated that the people who'd stripped us and drugged us and seated us naked under chandeliers had also done their homework well enough to identify the one thing that would make Yukinoshita Yukino hesitate. Because hesitation was all they needed. Hesitation was the crack in the wall, and they'd pour concrete into it until it became a foundation.

"Orimoto Kaori-san—media production and content creation. Totsuka Saika-san—professional tennis, with transitional support into sports therapy and rehabilitation upon retirement." The profiles cascaded, each ambition met with a corresponding government package precise enough to feel bespoke.

Because it was bespoke. That was the point. Each benefit package had been assembled after selecting the participants, reverse-engineered to target the exact pressure point that would make refusal most painful. They hadn't just researched our names and faces. They'd researched our wants. They'd mapped the topology of each person's ambition, identified the gap between where we were and where we wanted to be, and built a bridge across it—a bridge with a toll booth at the centre and a nursery at the other end.

And wants were leverage.

"The volunteer participants receive the same support." Aria gestured toward the staff-side of the room. "Take Kawashima Ami-san—screen acting." The model's face appeared on screen, photographed professionally and unmistakably. "Industry introductions, audition priority for government-funded film projects, acting workshops with established directors, and—given the programme's media profile—guaranteed public visibility."

Near the stage wing, Kawashima Ami stood with her arms folded, weight on one hip, expression unreadable. But she was listening. The tilt of her head said she was listening very carefully, the way someone listens when they're hearing terms they've already agreed to read back for the public record.

"Beyond individual ambitions," Shino took over, flipping to a new section with the crisp authority of someone transitioning from the seduction phase to the terms and conditions, "BREED provides universal benefits to all participants."

The screen filled with a list that scrolled like end credits. The end credits of my autonomy, presumably.

"Government-subsidised housing, including priority access to family housing in Tokyo metropolitan areas."

Housing. In Tokyo. Anyone who'd spent ten minutes apartment-hunting in that city understood the weight of those words. Priority access to family housing—the kind of two-bedroom, reasonably-priced units in decent wards that had waiting lists stretching longer than the Chūō Line. The kind of housing that people worked sixty-hour weeks for a decade to qualify for, and even then

only if the timing and the paperwork and the sheer blind luck of the draw aligned.

"Student loan forgiveness for participants currently enrolled in university."

Half the room was still in university. I was still in university. That number on my phone's banking app—the one I carefully avoided looking at because it had too many digits and a minus sign—twitched in my consciousness like a nerve being prodded.

"Pension credits. Years of programme participation count toward retirement benefits at the equivalent rate of full-time employment."

So a househusband in BREED wouldn't be an economic ghost. He'd be... pensioned. Recognised. Counted. The very thing I'd argued was impossible in that essay—domestic labour acknowledged by the system that had always rendered it invisible—was being offered to me on a government slideshow, sandwiched between healthcare coverage and childcare funding, as if it were just another line item rather than the quiet demolition of everything I'd believed about how society valued people like the person I wanted to become.

'Stop it.' I pushed the thought down with both hands. *'They're buying you. You can see the receipt.'*

"Full comprehensive healthcare coverage—not standard national insurance. Private-tier medical care for all participants and their families."

"Childcare fully funded through the STORK system—our proprietary early childhood development programme—and continuing support through schooling."

"Travel allowances for international opportunities. Business startup grants. Professional licensing fast-track programmes. Expedited citizenship processing for foreign-born partners or family members. Legal representation provided for any programme-related matters."

She paused. The pause was architectural—a beat of silence designed to let the cumulative weight of everything she'd just listed settle over the room like snowfall. Quiet. Heavy. Impossible to brush off without acknowledging it was there.

"And all participation records are classified. Your involvement is protected under national privacy statutes. No public disclosure. No media exposure without consent."

Golden handcuffs. Every single benefit was a golden handcuff. Housing you couldn't afford elsewhere. Loan forgiveness you'd have to repay if you left. Pension credits that evaporated upon withdrawal. Healthcare you'd lose. Childcare you'd need. Privacy protections that only mattered while you were inside the system that granted them.

They weren't offering freedom. They were offering a cage with excellent amenities and a view of the ocean. Every benefit was calibrated to make the cost of leaving higher than the cost of staying. The deeper you went, the more you had to lose. By the time you'd accepted the housing, forgiven the loans, enrolled your children in STORK, and built your career on government grants—you were in. Permanently. Not because they'd locked the door, but because you'd furnished the room.

I saw it. I saw all of it. The architecture was elegant in the way a trap is elegant—every piece functional, every joint invisible, every exit technically open but practically sealed by the weight of everything you'd have to abandon to walk through it.

The question was whether anyone else saw it too.

"So," Aria said brightly, clapping her hands together with the enthusiasm of a nursery school teacher announcing snack time. "That's what we offer."

She and Shino exchanged a glance. Something rehearsed. Something choreographed. The glance of two people who'd practised this handoff in a mirror and knew exactly where the detonator was.

"And what we ask in return," Shino said, her voice dropping into a register that was almost gentle, the way a doctor's voice goes gentle right before they tell you the test results aren't what you'd hoped, "is quite simple."

The screen behind them went blank. Then filled with a single sentence, each word fading in with cinematic deliberation:

MARRY AND START A FAMILY

For a fraction of a second—a shameful, unguarded fraction—I'd almost been considering it. The pension credits. The househusband recognition. The cage was well-furnished and the view was good and for one treacherous heartbeat the part of my brain that had written that essay about domestic labour thought *maybe*—

"All we need from you," Aria said, her smile reaching its full radiance, her hands clasped before her as if in prayer or presentation or both, "is to marry and make babies with Hikigaya-kun here."

A spotlight hit me.

An actual spotlight. Mounted on the ceiling. Angled and focused and calibrated to illuminate exactly one centre chair and its occupant with the intensity of a thousand suns. Someone had installed this spotlight. Someone had wired it. Someone had tested the angle during setup, probably using a stand-in, and adjusted the beam width to ensure it captured the full seated figure including, presumably, the lap.

My hands were still in my lap.

My pharmaceutical situation had not improved.

Every eye in the room found me. Every single one. I could feel them like individual points of heat—pinpricks of attention converging on my exposed, hairless, involuntarily aroused body with the collective force of a judgement so absolute that no court of appeals existed, no statute of limitations applied, and no plea bargain could reduce the sentence.

Silence.

One beat. Two.

Then the room detonated.

"HIM?!" Miura's voice broke through first, a frequency that could shatter crystal and probably did something terrible to the chandeliers. "You want me to—with Hikio?!"

"Wait. Hold on. Hold on." Orimoto's laugh was incredulous, teetering on the edge of something less stable. "Hikigaya? Hikigaya Hikigaya? From middle school?"

From middle school. Even now, even here, even naked in a government facility, I was being identified by the worst era of my social history. The brand was permanent. The brand would outlive me.

"I—" Ebina's voice came out breathless, her chair scraping forward. "So when you say *make babies*... you mean... with Hikigaya-kun... all of us... together in the same—"

"Hina. No." Miura's hand found Ebina's shoulder from down the row. "Whatever you're constructing in your head right now, stop."

"But Yumiko, the *possibilities*—"

"I said stop."

"Senpai." Iroha's voice beside me was quiet. Controlled. The control of a woman gripping a live grenade and deciding, with academic detachment, whether pulling the pin would be more satisfying than the restraint of not pulling it. "Did you know about this?"

"Do I look like I knew about this?"

"You look like a lot of things right now, senpai. A lot of things."

Kawashima Ami's laugh cut through the cacophony from the stage wing—a single sharp note, bright and brittle and deeply amused in a way that suggested the amusement was a load-bearing structure keeping something far less pleasant from collapsing through.

"Well," she said to no one in particular. "Points for ambition."

Saki hadn't said a word. I knew because the absence of her voice was louder than the screaming. She sat somewhere down the row in a silence dense enough to warp light, and I didn't need to see her face to know that whatever was happening behind it was being processed at a depth the rest of the room's surface-level panic couldn't reach.

"Everyone, please—" Aria raised her hands.

"BABIES?!" Yui's voice cracked from somewhere down the row, hitting a register that could summon dolphins. "You can't just—you can't announce—this is—"

"Is this legal?!" Saki's voice. Flat. Lethal. The voice of someone already composing litigation in her head.

"As outlined in section four of the—"

"I didn't sign section four of anything!"

The chaos had a shape to it. A familiar one. Denial, anger, bargaining—Kübler-Ross playing out in real time across the row. Some were stuck on stage one, mouths open, eyes glazed, buffering like a video stream that had encountered more data than its connection could handle. Others had rocketed straight to stage two with the velocity of a bullet train that had skipped all local stops.

Meanwhile, the volunteer staff stood at their positions, unmoved. Watching. Some with sympathy. Some with the careful neutrality of people who'd already made their peace with the terms and were now observing others arrive at the

same crossroads they'd faced in private, months ago, with the luxury of clothing and time.

Yukino's voice reached me. Quiet. Clear. Carrying through the noise the way a cold wind carries through a crowd—not by force, but by temperature. Everything it touched went still.

"Hachiman."

Just my name. Nothing else. No question, no accusation, no demand. Just my name, spoken with a precision that suggested she was testing whether it still belonged to the person she thought she knew, or whether it had been reassigned to this naked stranger sitting under a spotlight in a government breeding programme.

I didn't move my head.

I didn't turn my head towards the voice

I couldn't.

Not because of the nudity or the spotlight or the situation, but because Yukinoshita Yukino saying my first name in that tone—a tone I'd heard perhaps three times in the entirety of our acquaintance, each instance marking a moment where something between us shifted permanently—while I sat at the centre of this circus meant that anything I showed on my face in the next three seconds would determine the trajectory of a conversation I was not equipped to have. Not here. Not now. Not like this.

So I stared at the B.R.E.E.D. logo on the screen and I thought about GDP and population pyramids and the heat death of the universe and I waited for the ground to open up and swallow me into the merciful darkness of geological irrelevance.

The ground did not cooperate. The ground never cooperated. The ground was, as always, firmly and unhelpfully solid beneath the feet of people who most needed it to not be.

Then the screen changed.

The B.R.E.E.D. logo vanished, replaced by a video feed—a darkened room, a single spotlight, the aesthetic of a hostage video produced by someone with an alarming sense of theatrics. And at the centre of the frame, lit like a Bond villain delivering her manifesto, stood my sister.

Hikigaya Komachi.

Dressed in what could only be described as a baby's first cosplay of a government operative—a crisp black suit two sizes too large, a lanyard with a laminated badge she'd almost certainly made herself, and, inexplicably, an eyepatch. The eyepatch served no medical or functional purpose. It was there because Komachi had decided it should be, and that was the only justification Komachi had ever needed for anything.

She leaned into the camera. She grinned.

"Yaho!"

-=&<o>&=-
End

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